

*A'o*

# **Educational Traditions**

**Malcolm Nāea Chun**

**Ka Wana Series**



**Pihana Nā Mamo**



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Malcolm Nāea Chun

Ka Wana Series

Curriculum Research & Development Group  
University of Hawai'i

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# Ka 'Ōlelo Mua

## Foreword

Many of us are aware of the historical information documenting the high rate of literacy achieved in the kingdom of Hawai'i during the post-contact period and following the arrival of the American missionaries. Initiated and supported by the monarchy and traditional chiefs, literacy quickly spread to all parts of the island chain. Comparing this situation to today's where literacy data show great need for improvement for all children in Hawai'i, but especially Native Hawaiian children, it is clear that we can benefit by looking at early Hawaiian traditions in teaching and learning.

*A'o, Educational Traditions* examines how knowledge was transmitted in pre-contact Hawaiian society and describes some of the changes that occurred when American missionaries arrived with the Bible. Malcolm Nāea Chun, a Cultural Specialist with the University of Hawai'i's Curriculum Research & Development Group (CRDG), has researched historical accounts from primary sources, both Hawaiian and Haole (Euro-American), to bring to light the ways people taught and learned in early Hawai'i. These accounts and his analysis can help everyone in our educational system understand and appreciate how these Native Hawaiian educational traditions can be used today to facilitate better teaching and learning in our classrooms and island communities.

This book is part of the Ka Wana Series, a set of publications developed through Pihana Nā Mamo, a joint project of CRDG and the Hawai'i Department of Education, and designed to assist parents, teachers, students, and staff in their study and modern-

day application of Hawaiian customs and traditions. Mahalo to the many who continue to assist in the production of the Ka Wana Series: Reviewers Stephen Boggs, Papali'i Failautusi Avegalio, Hirini Mead, and Ka'iulani Vincent for their reading and comments; Editor Lori Ward for editing and proofreading; Project Co-Directors Gloria S. Kishi and Hugh H. Dunn; the Pihana Nā Mamo 'ohana of the Hawai'i Department of Education and the Curriculum Research & Development Group, College of Education, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa; and the U.S. Department of Education, which provided the funding for Pihana Nā Mamo.

Morris K. Lai, Principal Investigator  
Pihana Nā Mamo

# Ōlelo Ha'i Mua

## Preface

Do you believe I'm wearing a kukui lei?  
 It's Hawaiian in looks—it's plastic made in Hong Kong.  
 That's what became of a lot our beliefs.  
 I wore this on purpose. I wanted you to know this is kukui nut.  
 It's not kukui nut, but it's Hawaiian, but it's Hawaiian made in  
 Hong Kong of plastic, and that's the way a lot of our beliefs  
 and customs have become.  
 —attributed to Mary Kawena Pukui



Cultural revival and identification have gone beyond academic and intellectual arguments to a reality in communities and families and are now part of the political landscape of the islands. In asking the question “Who are we?” people are really asking how they see the world differently from others and how this affects the way they make decisions. These are questions about a people’s world view—how they see the world around them, and ultimately, how they see themselves.

In the 1960s, social workers at the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center, a trust created to benefit orphaned and destitute Native Hawaiian children, began to notice behaviors of their children and families that were quite different from the textbook cases they had studied in school. In response, the center initiated a project to identify Hawaiian cultural and social practices and behaviors, and to study them as they contrasted with their Western counterparts. The impact and influence of the resulting books, entitled *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, are still felt in Native Hawaiian communities, where the books are now a standard reference.



By 1992 *Nānā I Ke Kumu* was considered historical information, and as the cultural specialist for the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center, I became involved in a project to update it. We were still seeing cases that involved Hawaiian cultural practices and behaviors foreign to both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian workers that needed to be considered in any programs designed to help. We were having to re-adapt traditional healing practices like ho‘oponopono to accommodate changes such as family schedules, misunderstanding or not knowing Hawaiian language and concepts, and having non-Hawaiian family members. We realized that there was, once again, a great need for a series that would examine, in depth, key concepts and values for Native Hawaiians to understand and practice today.

This series is intended to fill that need. Each title is supported by historical and cultural examples taken from our oral and written literature, in most cases directly from primary sources that recorded how Hawaiians acted, reacted, responded, and behaved in different situations. Our goal is to make this knowledge more accessible to teachers, parents, and students.

Knowing how our ancestors behaved begs the question of whether we are doing the same. If we are practicing our culture in a way similar to how they did, then we know that Hawaiian culture is very much alive today. If we do things differently, we have to ask if those changes have been to our benefit, and whether we can reclaim what has been forgotten, lost, or suppressed.

## A'o mai, a'o aku

There was mana in the old days, and those people who were correctly taught had real mana; eyewitnesses could not say that their mana was false (wahahe'e).

Samuel Manaiakalani Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*

Nānā ka maka; ho'olohe ka pepeiao, pa'a ka waha.

Observe with the eyes; listen with the ears, shut the mouth  
[Thus one learns].

Traditional proverb, Mary Kawena Pukui, *Ōlelo Noeau*

Ha'alo'u knew no man who understands deep things should go uncompensated, for knowledge is not to be scattered about freely and "the laborer is worthy of his hire."

Samuel Manaiakalani Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*



A'o is the word for education, but it means much more. It implies both to learn (a'o mai) and to teach (a'o aku). This sense of receiving and giving supports the idea that relationships and belonging are primary actions in traditional Hawaiian society and culture. It is the idea that as one learns and becomes skilled (mastery), knowledge and skill are to be used and shared with others (generosity). This builds relationships of mutual dependence and support, bringing families and community together. And yet, having knowledge and skills gives one a sense of independence and identity within the family and community. This concept is expressed in a Maori proverb, first introduced to me by the Chief Judge of

the Waitangi Tribunal, the Honorable Eddie Durie: Hō atu taonga, hoki mai taonga, a gift given is a gift returned. This symbolizes that the building of a relationship that becomes mutual and long-lasting is as important as the gift itself.

What traditions we have about ancient education come from the “literature” [both oral and written traditions] of the chiefs and priests and describe how they were trained for their roles. We know about everyday labor, like farming and fishing, and the techniques that were used, but we have no detailed accounts of how people were taught those skills, perhaps because they were indeed everyday and ordinary.

Native historian John Papa ʻĪī described his own education. It was supported by his parents and intended to prepare him to become a skilled and well-trained servant of the King.

From the time he was little, Ii was taught by his father, Kuaena, the rules of good behavior, in preparation for his position in the royal court, where he was destined to go at the age of ten. They brought him up carefully, instructing him in all things, and saw to it that he was quick and capable, [. . .] (Ii 22)

This does not mean that our view of traditional learning and teaching is elitist; on the contrary, we shall see that there are certain common patterns of education throughout traditional society and culture.



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